Definitions

From the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion

RMPJ, 2/3/1987

Some food for thought for those of us who are fond of the word magic.

"...as the symbolic background of magical techniques as well as their deployment in official ceremonies shows, the transition between magic and religion is very fluid. Since religious symbols are always a synthesis between the visible and the invisible, they may be looked upon as signposts in the search for religious meaning, or misinterpreted as ends in themselves. In this sense each ritual may be either religious or magical, conditional upon the intention of the participants.

Distinctions can be made, as precise as the symbols and principles employed allow, among various types of magic. Substitute Magic is based upon the idea that a part substitutes for the whole, thereby reversing the transcendental principle that the part may represent the whole. Man seizes power over someone else by possessing parts of him, e.g. bones, hair, nails, etc. Contagious magic obtains when the substitution of the part for the whole is only partially realized and integrated into a scheme of causal connection. By touching or wearing power-laden objects such as relics, fetishes, sacred stones, amulets, etc. or even by assimilating them as in the case of cannibalism, man integrates him-self and his deeds into the efficacy of an invisible power structure. Sympathetic magic deals with symbols and their supposed unity or sympathy with that which is sympathized. It differs from substitute magic by the ideational character of the substitution. Examples are the anticipation of a successful hunt by striking a picture of the animal; the manipulation of pictures and figures in general; the use of curse figurines or dolls; the deployment of arcane formulas, both in connection with pictures and statues or independently from them. In this latter instance, the practice of subjecting the godhead, a ghost, or an individual to one's will by means of a name or proper formula should also be mentioned. Gnoseological magic appears as a more or less autonomous type when the instrumental function of knowledge and reason becomes an end in itself. The knowledge of the right time, the right setting, the godhead proper in a given situation, is in itself sufficient reason to achieve the desired goal. The world of the sacred as a means of orientation for the growth and meaning of the person turns into a state of impersonal and mechanically effective anonymity. Ascetic technique becomes its own end, effective by its very deployment.

As a technique of reaching goals by means different from those required by these goals, magic is of particular significance for the social life of a community. In this regard we have to distinguish between official and private magic. Official magic obtains when public affairs are treated by help of magical techniques, e.g., when a drought is counteracted by the imitative act of sprinkling water, or when the office of a shaman is a generally recognized institution. Private magic on the other hand is a matter of individuals and/or exclusive groups who, often in deep secrecy, use their knowledge and techniques in order to pursue their particular goals..."

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